

NOTES--Not for Circulation Without Permission
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Comments on Tony Polumba, "First Strike: Shield for Intervention,"
in The Deadly Connection, ed. Joe Gerson

[Thanks to Freeze movement and PSR], "The public knows enough about nuclear war to understand that the United States should not start a nuclear war, and that once started, a nuclear war can probably not be contained." (Polumba, p. 76)

(This has been confirmed recently for Europe as well: see Time or Newsweek poll).

[Nor can a two-sided conventional war between US and SU probably be contained; thus, this too must not be allowed to start. Not only the public but the leaders on both sides have shown appropriate caution about this. Yet we have come remarkably close to this in the past: Cuba 1962, Egypt 1973, and perhaps Lebanon 1984. Can we afford to place all our emphasis on avoiding this--as George Rathjens, for example, seemed to suggest at the Boston Roundtable last summer--while building systems that ensure that such a conflict would quickly escalate?]

"We deserve a moment of self-congratulations for the effort that has led to this state of public awareness. However, this achievement has a darker side.

"We might also be applauded by Ronald Reagan and company for our educational successes. The public's knowledge and fear of nuclear war have been used by administration officials as a basis for explaining the value of 'Star Wars.' Stressing the 'defensive' nature of this system and the higher morality inherent in targetting the enemy's weapons, not its people, and holding out the hope that nuclear weapons (and therefore nuclear war) can soon be obsolete, the president wants the American people's support for spending two hundred to five hundred billion dollars to crowd the heavens with nuclear weapons."

[This goes beyond the observation that the President has managed to deflect public concern without actually changing his programs: e.g., by entering "negotiations", on INF and START. (Was it, by any chance, to achieve just this--negotiations and nothing more--that the media suddenly gave great attention to the Freeze movement in the spring and summer of 1982?)

Polumba, here, suggests that President has actually harnessed the concerns raised by the Freeze to mobilize support for his Star Wars programs, which might have seemed excessively costly and dangerous and destructive to arms control otherwise. Indeed, one might even ask, in this light: How far ahead did anyone in the

Administration see this possible effect? We now know that the President himself, encouraged by Teller as far back as the '60's, had something like Star Wars in his mind from the very beginning of his Administration, without at all showing his hand to the public. (While others in the CPD have opposed the ABM Treaty almost as long, and schemed to add ABM defense to our first strike capability).

2. "...it is important that we do our best to provide the facts and analysis that will lead people beyond a fear of nuclear war to an understanding of why nuclear war. It is important to understand why a nuclear war is a real possibility in the 1980's." (p. 77)

Yes. This well defines our educational problem. The failure to do so adequately has played into Reagan's hands, in several ways:

1) We have failed to impart the sense of urgency to the public that might have changed priorities for voters in 1984--and for that matter, gotten a more committed challenge on these issues out of Mondale.

2. The lack of public understanding allowed Reagan to slip out of our pressure by talking to the Russians, without delivering an agreement; to make non-negotiable proposals, and proposals that would actually worsen stability if accepted, without much criticism; to put the onus for failure to agree on the Soviets; all while pursuing first-strike, destabilizing weapons.

3. It allowed Congress to give in to the President's weapons programs, without incurring public wrath or punishment in the elections. It allowed "Freeze supporters" in the Congress to vote next for the MX, without penalty; and MX opponents to support the Trident II.

4. Finally, as TP notes, it has not only permitted Congresspersons who "support the Freeze" to accept the Star Wars research budget, but it may actually have enhanced support for Star Wars: at least for the "research and development," which may be actually critical to the arms race. Even the publicity about "nuclear winter" may have contributed to this (which, again, could be why the Pentagon and the Labs have been relatively open to pursuing and endorsing these results. Note that Teller and Wood have endorsed, at least privately, the nuclear winter possibility in just this spirit).

Even if the Administration and Labs did not foresee these possibilities, they have certainly been quick to exploit them.

To return to TP's proposition: Chomsky makes a similar point in the opening sentence of "The Drift Towards Global War": "Let me begin by saying that a terminal nuclear war is not an unlikely prospect. We have come disturbingly close many times, and current

circumstances make the prospect quite threatening." (Studies in Political Economy # 17, p. 7). ... "What are the factors contributing to the drift towards nuclear war?"

Indeed, this is the observation, and question, with which to begin an effort towards better public understanding. (Both are relatively new for Chomsky. Indeed, it creates some problems for his usual analyses, which assume great lucidity and control on the part of--unspecified--managers of national security: Why are they letting these risks persist and increase? Earlier, he assumed the risk was really negligible, precisely because of adequate foresight and control on both sides, so he didn't face this question).

Why is a terminal nuclear war not unlikely? Why is it possible at all? Why is it, indeed, probable: probably irreversibly so, probably unavoidable? (as it has come to look to me in my darkest moments, this summer) Even the less gloomy questions lead one toward the essential considerations.

The gloomier question reflects the scale of the public movement to end the arms race, both in Europe and America, compared to its total failure to do so (or, in retrospect, to come close to doing so). The less gloomy must reflect (aside from a generous allowance for wholly unforeseen developments) a sense that "we can do significantly better." This sense might well be based on the possibility of significantly different public understanding of the problem, leading both to greater priority and urgency and to better-targeted efforts.

It must also reflect the possibility of learning from past experience, and discovering better strategies and tactics for social and political change in the US. For example, better understanding of the role of military spending in the US economy and society, and emphasis on conversion; understanding of media and how to influence them; vastly greater fund-raising; continuous focus on Congress, as well as on Presidential elections...

[I find in myself, as of this morning, a new willingness, compared to the last months since the failure of the Soviet moratorium initiative, to contemplate the question: What do we do now? But I see this not in a short-term perspective, except for the (rather small, but important) possibility of heading off the new weapons developments three years from now, with a new President. Probably we have failed, and will fail, to avert these developments--MX, Pershing II, D5, ASAT, SLCM's, and Soviet counterparts--which will make the world distinctly more dangerous about ten years from now, in the mid-90's. (Compare TP's comment on the 1980's).

I.e.: We have very probably lost Round I (stopping the arms race in time to avert the new generation of destabilizing offensive weapons on both sides). Yet we have achieved a good deal, in public understanding and mobilization, and we have

potentially learned a good deal, about the obstacles to change and the sources of the race. Surely humans are not entitled to conclude that dangers that do not fully emerge for a decade absolutely cannot be averted; still less, that they cannot subsequently be reduced (even though a valid grasp of reality may now demand recognition that success in either sense is much less likely than not). The stakes are more than high enough to make the effort worthwhile. As I always used to end my lectures: "That's our task. Let's get on with it."

Indeed, what TP implies is that if we do not do this, not only persist in our efforts but go "beyond the fear of nuclear war" to "begin to develop campaigns and strategies that offer concrete ways to oppose and to change the first strike and nuclear warfighting policies of the United States," we must live with the thought that our efforts up till now may have actually made matters worse (by creating support for Star Wars)! (p. 95) "Unless we begin this difficult but critical task, our past educational efforts may work against nuclear disarmament and support nuclear war policies and new weapons development that will escalate the arms race and bring us closer to the nuclear holocaust we have worked so hard to avert."

On Mutual Assured Destruction and Preemption

"MAD was never U.S. policy, if one defines it as "pure deterrence." It existed from roughly 1970 on as a technological reality as opposed to a policy." (p. 85)

"Mutually assured destruction then was not the result of rational agreement to maintain a limited number of invulnerable nuclear weapons, but the result of the inability of U.S. nuclear weapons technology to maintain a counterforce edge as a result of the increased number of Soviet hardened missile silos." (p. 83)

Another factor leading to the "technological reality" of MAD was the infeasibility, then and for the foreseeable future, of a population defense by ABM. (Even a cost-effective defense of missiles was not feasible in the late-60s and early-70s--nor was it necessary, given the limitations then on accuracy and the effectiveness of hardening--so that the ABM Treaty was politically achievable more for technical reasons than because of any aversion to defense in principle or pursuit of stability by either side.

Appeals to stability, and to the "principle" of achieving it by "leaving" populations vulnerable and enemy forces invulnerable, were simply rationalizations making it politically easier for each government to forego enormous expenditures--in the context of an agreement in which the opponent would also forego this effort--for weapons that would be essentially ineffective and useless from any

point of view, but which would nevertheless have been built, in the absence of an agreement, because of pressure from the respective military-industrial complexes and the appeal of matching the other's systems.

It was foreseeable that eventually BMD--defense of ballistic missile silos, by a variety of means including terminal ABM--would become feasible and perhaps cost-effective. At that time, one could foresee, there would be pressure to scrap or modify the ABM Treaty, by MIC components associated with ABM developers and others associated with the USAF and their desire to "preserve the land-based leg of the Triad," i.e., USAF ICBMs. The opposition to such a change would cite the great cost and the lack of necessity to do so (given US reliance on SLBMs: in the absence of any tangible threat to these), and the political danger of opening the door to a program of population defense--appealing but infeasible and infinitely expensive--and finally, the likelihood that this would make the Soviets unwilling to contemplate reducing their offensive forces and might even stimulate them to reject existing limits on these and to increase them sharply, leading in turn to US increases.

Why would even BMD have this latter effect on the Soviets? After all, an improved ability to protect U.S. land-based missiles from Soviet attack, whether by hardening, terminal defenses, or by mobility, does not reduce Soviet ability to retaliate, and thus to deter U.S. attack. If the latter were the only objective of Soviet strategic forces--i.e., if the Soviet policy were "Type I Deterrence-only"--there would be no need for the Soviets to increase their forces in response to measures to reduce the vulnerability of U.S. strategic forces. But then they would not need now the scale or type of forces they have built.

Most analysts, including those associated with the Freeze (like Chris Paine) do, in fact, expect the Soviets to increase their offensive forces if the US goes ahead with ABMs, even if they are limited to terminal defense (unlike the SDI). This reflects their inference--inescapable from actual Soviet doctrines and posture--that Soviet aims include both "second-strike damage limitation" and its corollary, an ability effectively to preempt. And probably this is sought not only for "insurance" and preservation of their society and strength if deterrence should fail, but for reasons similar to the Pentagon's as well: to pose a threat of Soviet escalation, up to full-scale preemption, to deter the US from entering, or escalating, a direct combat involvement with Soviet forces. Another aim, also political, would be simply to assure that the Soviets are perceived as having the same functional capabilities (in this case, for preemption and damage-limiting counterforce attacks) as the US, not to be "inferior."

The Star Wars program could always have been predicted to have these effects on the Soviets, even if it were limited to BMD --i.e., terminal defense (and perhaps some mid-course layer of defense) protecting hardened sites, not cities. With a boost-phase layer of defense, and the avowed objective of protecting

cities, the Soviets would be challenged to increase their offensive forces even if their objectives were only Type I Deterrence.

Here again, it could be argued to the Soviets (by Freeze supporters) that they should restrict their aims to deterrence-only--since damage-limitation is both delusory and destabilizing--and that for this aim they already have far more warheads than they need to deter the US, even with a US Star Wars program: given the actual, foreseeable limitations on the effectiveness of any population defense. However, both parts of this argument are likely to fail to persuade the Soviets. Gorbachev could probably not persuade or compel the Soviet military to give up the objective of damage-limitation, or preemptive capability; the Soviets, after their World War II experience, seem, if anything, more wedded to these aims, in principle, than USAF (though for perhaps different reasons). (This was one Soviet official's judgement, when I made this argument). Nor would they be willing to gamble on the ineffectiveness of the US Star Wars technology. Not only do they make "worst case" assumptions like the US--both for military conservatism and, probably, for Soviet MIC incentives--but they evidently have an exaggerated, somewhat magical, fear of US technical prowess.

Nevertheless, the truth is that Star Wars, at its most effective, will not affect the "technological reality" of MAD as a condition (and BMD alone, or as a component of Star Wars, would reinforce it). That is, it will continue to be true that each side will retain the capability to destroy the cities of the other even after the other's most effective first strike. This is the essence of MAD: that even striking first, in the most efficient possible way, will not deprive the opponent of the ability to annihilate your urban population. This is not only true today, as it has been for both sides for about twenty years; virtually all analysts, even in the Reagan Administration (except for Wood and Teller at the Labs, Reagan and Weinberger) agree that it would continue to be true after deployment of the most effective SDI foreseeable twenty years from now.

Indeed, although supporters of the ABM Treaty ascribe past and current stability to it--both leaving populations at risk on both sides, and making arms limitation agreements possible--almost nothing in the strategic equation would be different today had there never been any of the these treaties. There would probably have been a lot of money wasted on both sides on ABM systems that did not deliver any more effectiveness in protecting cities than the Soviet anti-aircraft defenses since World War II.

That does not mean that it will make no difference to the future if the Reagan Administration succeeds in wiping the ABM Treaty off the books, or effectively guts it. The new technologies, if backed by the kind of money Reagan proposes to devote to them, not only promise effective terminal defense but an ominous uncertainty as to a degree of population defense (where past technologies could not even raise this "fear". Most of all, they enhance antisatellite threats, posing a very high likelihood

that the side striking first could sweep space clean of the opponent's command and control, intelligence and warning capabilities, along with its Star Wars defenses. (Again, if the opponent placed no premium at all on damage limitation or preemption or the threat of escalation, this prospect would not be so ominous; retaliation against cities could still be assured. But the Soviet Union is not such an opponent).

Moreover, if new agreements limiting offensive arms were to be no more constraining than past ones have been, the abandonment of the arms control effort would have little effect on the prospects of strategic stability. But the current prospects in the arms build-ups, in contrast to past years, are for an imminent worsening of crisis stability. There is an urgent need for agreements that would be far more restraining than past ones, effectively stopping the arms buildups on both sides altogether, to avert the oncoming generation of counterforce weapons. This would be true even without any prospect of Star Wars programs; with the deployment of Star Wars, both arms race stability and crisis stability will decline still further, to even more dangerous levels. And even a high level of Star Wars research, long before any deployment, will preclude the sorts of moratoriums and Freeze agreements that are urgently necessary.

All this is true despite the fact that Mutual Destruction will indubitably continue to be Assured, whether the new weapons are built or not, whether Star Wars defenses are deployed or not. Neither side has any prospect whatever of ever being able to destroy, by a first strike, the ability of its opponent to retaliate massively against its own cities. [February 1986 Note: Yet--in the informed view of John Pike of FAS--the U.S., in particular, may be able to achieve for a limited time, a decade or so starting a decade from now, a distinct asymmetry in its favor of damage-limiting capability in a preemptive first strike, based on imminent improvements in its counterforce weapons, ASAT, "decapitation" capabilities against Soviet C3I, and Star Wars. It is this that the Reagan Administration is pursuing, for use in "nuclear diplomacy."]